

Insights Into James

by
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The book of James may be thought of as a handbook of advice to believers in God. It is very definitely written for those who are believers. It is like a book of instructions that is given to someone who is working a garden, a whole series of individual guidances, instructions, as to how he might profit in working his garden.

The book of James is not a philosophical, theological book of explanations. It is not a doctrinal summary of dogma, but it is a practical book to guide conduct in the will of God. It does not deal with the problem of coming to faith but it deals with the problem that the believer will encounter who lives in faith.

It is a striking thing to know that in this book there are only four direct Old Testament quotations, but there are fifty-three Old Testament references restated. And this implies something to me about studying in the Bible. It is not so important to have the exact words in mind at all times, but it is important to grasp the meaning of those words.

This book does not emphasize the believer's relation to Christ Jesus, his Advocate before God; but it proceeds from the fact that the believer is now committed to do the will of God. The believer now has in him the Holy Spirit who is activating the will of the Lord, so that it is Christ in the believer, the hope of glory. Actually this is what Christ came to do. Christ Jesus came to reconcile the believer to God and to live in him by doing the will of God through this believer's faith.

There is not much known about the author of this book, James, beyond saying that he was the brother of Jesus of Nazareth. Mary was his mother. He was recognized as a good man and was given the name of James the Just. It was reported of him that he spent so much time in prayer that his knees became callous like a camel's knees. Tradition says that at a time when a large number of the Jews were accepting Christ, you will remember on the Day of Pentecost there were 5,000, so that a large number of Jews were accepting Christ as Messiah, the Sanhedrin ordered James to publicly renounce his faith. This he refused to do. When he refused to do it they carried him to the top of a high pinnacle on the wall of the city; he was thrown off the wall. Then as he was thrown down off the wall he was stoned to death. This is the way tradition puts the story of James the author of this book.

The course of this book can be understood or can be seen as dealing with a series of problems arising out of practical situations which come up when a soul undertakes to live in faith. Now we will look at these in succession. First we have the problem of suffering. This is found in the first chapter in the first twenty-one verses. James makes it very simple; suffering is inevitable. It is unavoidable. But it can be profitable.

In the course of what he writes it would appear that suffering comes from two sources. In the first place there is the suffering which in providence comes from God. This is a testing of one's faith. This kind of suffering brings out the best in you. Then there is another kind of suffering that comes up out of our own nature in which our own disposition to seek our own selfish ends comes to the forefront. This tends to bring out the worst in you.

With reference to that first kind of suffering, the suffering that comes as it were in providence from God, James writes "Let him ask of God." Let the believer turn to God and get help. In the second case when the suffering or temptation comes from our own natures, we read "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath." The bottom line of this whole discussion is in verse 21 where James writes "Receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls."

The second problem that we face is the problem of applying Scripture which is dealt with in James 1:22-27. There is no need to spend long in study here: James is very clear with reference to applying Scripture. It is a very simple matter: just do it. Hearing it, having an intellectual knowledge of what the Bible says is not enough; do it and you can tell when it is done, because it will make a difference. The third problem comes up in the second chapter, and that is the problem of esteeming others. The believer lives in the company of other people. How shall he feel about them? In verse 8 we read "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." But there is a warning here: we are not to esteem other people because of who they are as human beings. certainly not because of what they have. Esteeming others on the basis of human rating is sin and James makes it a point to say that that sin is just as much sin as theft or murder or adultery would be.

We are so much inclined to feel in our human way that anything is sinful if it is ugly, and if it is dirty. I am sure that much sin is ugly, and much sin is dirty, but we need to remember that sin can be perfumed, it can be dainty. Anything that comes from pride is sin.

The fourth problem that we see in here is the problem of responding to the Word of God. This is discussed in chapter 2, verses 14-26. The problem of responding to the Word of God begins with accepting the Word in faith as it reads. But it must be carried out in obedience, in performance. This is something that James makes very emphatic. In some respects most of us in our understanding of Scripture and our reading of the New Testament associate this with James perhaps more than with any other one writer. The great emphasis, that of accepting the Word, responding to the Word of God, is not only a matter of knowing what the Word says, but carrying it out in performance.

Here is something for us to note. The Word of God is not so much simply a declaration of facts; it is not a narrative of things that happened; the Word of God can be best understood as a call to action. When God calls us, that is the way the Word will come to us. James makes it very plain: "Faith, if it hath not works, is dead." That is to say, that if faith did not lead to a performance, it is dead. In verse 26 he summarizes this whole section by saying "Faith without works is dead." The response of the Word of God that is acceptable, takes the form of performance, whatever God wants the believer to do.

The fifth problem is the problem of self-control. This is found in chapter 3. Basically it is the control of one's words, and that means one's thoughts. You know when you are thinking about controlling yourself, you understand before the actual matter of controlling can come in there have to be ideas. The individual must think of certain options of possible procedure, so that he can make a choice. Then he can guide himself in the choice that he has made: that is the controlling.

This must be done in the realm of thought. The believer has the old man in his flesh. Paul would call the old man "the flesh." James does not identify it that way. He does not talk about it that way. But James does say that he must control himself.

James takes the tongue as an example. The Scripture says that as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he. Now thinking in his heart is the way he is talking: it is what he is saying, what he is doing. "Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaketh." These are Scriptures that come to our mind. In other words as far as the believer is concerned, his own tongue must be curbed. But when you speak about curbing a man's tongue, you mean his thoughts, and that will mean his words, in the way he expresses himself. This must be curbed.

James goes on to speak of wisdom. When James uses the word "wisdom" I think you could have in mind concepts, the frame of mind, consciousness. As far as "wisdom" is concerned it must mean what I

think, the way in which I feel. There are two kinds of wisdom contrasted. In James 3:14-16 wisdom is referred to as earthly, sensual, devilish. James pointed out that it can be recognized in their own conduct. He wrote:

But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work (James 3:14-16).

But there is another kind of wisdom. There is another frame of mind than that, which is described in verses 17-18:

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. 6 And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace (James 3:17-18).

We can notice that the first kind of wisdom, the first frame of mind, that comes out of one's own heart, is earthly, natural, devilish; but the second that is commended is that which comes from above. It does not come from above, in that there are so many words that stand out before you; which you read and think about and then accept as being true. But these come from the heart, from within. In the New Covenant the prophet quoted God as saying, "I will write my law in their heart and put my thoughts in their consciousness." This is what God would do in the New Covenant, and this is what it means here. This is the wisdom that comes from above.

These are five problems that James considers. When we come to chapter 4 we come to a sixth problem. This is the problem of conduct. The problem of conduct is lodged in the confrontation of the world on the one hand with God on the other. When you contrast the world and God, you can have in mind that which is of the world is the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (I John 2:16). But when you think about God you will remember God is love, and that implies the denial of self. You remember about the Lord Jesus Christ "He gave Himself a ransom for many." So there is a confrontation so far as the believer is concerned, in his awareness of things between the world which is summarized in self, and God which is summarized in love, involving the denial of self.

As James discusses this problem, he points out that wars and fightings actually are grounded in our own inner conflicts. He writes:

From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not (James 4:1-2).

This is the condition of the natural person. There is an implacable conflict between the world, which is all summarized in things which pertain to self, and God who primarily is set forth as the One who cares, the One who loves.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

When you think about this implacable conflict, you can see that it is irreconcilable. There is no possible way of coming to any compromise.

The believer is only a human being. What can he do? In verse 6 we read with reference to God "He giveth more grace." In verse 7 we are told "Submit yourselves therefore to God." In verse 8 "draw nigh to God" and in verse 10 "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord." This is the way in which you have the possibility of victory in this conflict. When you are thinking of humbling yourself you can have in mind "each esteeming other better than themselves."

In this connection James also urges believers to avoid proud planning for the future. At this point

James launches a very heavy condemnation of members who have hoarded riches, in chapter 5 verses 1-6; then he writes an encouraging word to believers in chapter 5 verses 7-12 urging them to be patient.

The final problem that is discussed is the problem of calling upon God. In James 5:13-18 James sets forth an eloquent encouragement to pray.

Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms. Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him (James 5:13-15).

At this point I feel I want to share with you my own thoughts on this very important section. I know that many earnest and sincere people have taken this passage here in James to imply that if you brought the elders together, and anointed the sick man and prayed over him, the man would get well. I do not think that is really what this passage says. Please, I want to say at once, I am sure some people have done this in this very way: I am sure some people have gathered together, have called on the elders and have had them anoint the sick and have prayed over them and the sick have gotten well. But I do not think that was based on this passage. That would be based on praying to God "Whatsoever ye ask in my name, that will I do." We have had that promise in other passages of Scripture.

In understanding this passage of Scripture I am impressed with it as it reads. Let me go over it very slowly with you. "Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save the sick" (5:14-15). Now that does not say "heal." "Save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up." You might say "Well doesn't that mean healing?" No, I do not think it does. For me, I do not think it does. Raising him up is to bring him up in strength, in his faith, encouraging him and helping him and "if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him."

We read on in verse 16: "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed." Yes! And you could be healed of those faults that you have. I know that you can make it include the idea of healing the body. I realize that, but I do not think that is the major thrust here. I think the major thing is that if you confess your faults one to another and pray one for another you can be healed of that fault that you have. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

Now my reason for taking time to dwell upon this is a very practical one. As pastor I have worked with people in the church, and have tried to help them in their spiritual experience. I have seen instances when very earnest prayer was made, and the patient died. Did that mean that those people failed? Or shall we say that in all prayer, any time that you ask God for some specific thing, such as asking Him for the healing of the body, the proper request along that line would be "Father, all things are possible unto thee. If it be possible let this cup pass from me." In other words the prayer that is actually urging God to help in a specific situation should always be "If it be thy will. Not my will but thine be done." You can be real sure when you see a person who is sick that he feels downhearted and discouraged. The person who is sick in body gets to where he feels bad all over, and he just begins to doubt God. So you call the elders of the church, and they pray over this man, with the result that this man is actually raised up in his faith, strengthened to put his trust in God. The fact is that not everybody is going to live forever. We should not have in mind that there is such a promise here that if you carried this procedure out faithfully before God, nobody would ever die. That is not the way it is.

Actually I think that so far as we believers are concerned, there should always be the bottom line in our praying, "Not my will but thine be done" in specific requests that we make. But when we come to confessing our faults one to another, and praying one for another about those faults, we could be healed. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." This is an eloquent encouragement to pray.

James then draws attention to Elijah.

Elijah was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months (James 5:17).

You will remember Almighty God told him to pray that prayer. Almighty God told him when he was to go off into the mountains that there would be drought until God would give the word. Then God told him to pray that it should rain, and he did. This was not Elijah's own idea. This was God's idea and Elijah was given to understand it and so he carried it out in that way. And he prayed again and heaven gave rain and the earth brought forth her fruit.

This epistle ends with two verses that do not seem to be in particular relationship to what went just before them so far as prayer is concerned. But this is as far as the whole epistle is concerned. In this whole letter that James wrote to the believers, he said "Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him" any of you believers, if you stray from the truth, and one convert him as James was doing in his epistle, "let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins" (James 5:19-20). That does not mean hide a multitude of his own sins as a kind of a reward, but that means that he will hide a multitude of the sins of the person who has done wrong: he will be covering them up. Because you see whenever the others members of the congregation do wrong, there are two different ways in which you can deal with this. You can do like Ham did with Noah. You can go out and talk about it. You can talk about the wrong that was done and publicize it. Or you can cover them up. When you can understand the action of Ham in talking about his father Noah lying naked in the tent, you will find out really what the action of Ham was like when you note what Shem and Japheth did, the other two brothers. They walked in backwards and covered him, they would not even look and that is the attitude you have here. "Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins." All those sins of the sinner, they will be hidden, they will be covered up, by this gracious work of the believer who has helped him with reference to his spiritual walk with the Lord. Thus the general thrust of this earnest letter in this grim warfare of living in faith, this deadly battle that goes on between the world and God over the soul of man, the believer will suffer, but the believer can win by the grace of God.

In the history of interpretation of the New Testament epistles it has been common to hear about a supposed difference between the understanding of Paul as to the function of faith and the understanding of James. This supposed difference has often been popularly described by saying that Paul understood that salvation is by faith and faith alone, whereas James understood that salvation is by works.

Actually this seeming difference fades away when the literature involved is more closely examined. Paul seems to have been deeply concerned about the widespread mistake which the Jews made in the course of their national failure to realize what was promised to them in God's dealing with Abraham. Paul wrote to the Romans:

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth (Romans 10:1-4).

The "righteousness of God" in this passage is not the "righteousness" which God displays in His dealings, but it is the "righteousness" which God produces in the believer because of the New Covenant. When Israel failed to achieve righteousness in conduct by their obeying the law, God did a "new thing." He sent His chosen Servant the Messiah into the world in the form of man, that He (the Messiah) might achieve perfect righteousness, which would then become available, by faith, to His people as the "righteousness of God" – that is "righteousness from God in the believer." God is not "the possessor of this righteousness." He is the "producer of this righteousness."

This "righteousness" is the work of Christ, the Son of God, and comes to the believer as a "gift" in

a *work* of God known as "Justification." Like any gift it is not to be paid for. It is to the glory of Christ that it is "free." The Jews made the mistake of trying to earn this righteousness by keeping rules/regulations. Had they succeeded they would have had reason to boast. But God will not give glory to anyone but His Son. For this reason Paul wrote to the Galatians as he did, emphasizing "by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified."

In this context it is clearly set forth that a believer is saved by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord, quite apart from any works of his own in attempting to win the favor of God. Here we can say that a person is saved by simply believing in Jesus Christ.

But the fact appeared in the experience of the church, that there were persons who professed to believe who did not really commit themselves to Christ. Faith is exercised when the soul steps out on the promises of God. Faith is an action word. James insists that if there is faith there will be action in line with the promise. He emphasized when there is no action there is no faith. "Faith without works (with no action in line with the promise) is dead."

All this can be briefly indicated by saying that Paul says " A soul is saved by faith (in God) and *not by works* (of the law)" and James says " A soul is saved by *faith that works* in obeying the will of God."